



# Orchid Safari : on the Western Heights

Harry Dyer

OUR group of twenty (plus two very well-behaved dogs) set out from the Market Square in brilliant sunshine on the 20th of May for a three-mile safari on the Western Heights.

Under the leadership of Melanie Wrigley, one of the Project officers of the White Cliffs Countryside Project, the first stop was the Cowgate Cemetery. After many years of neglect the site is now managed as a meadow to protect the many types of flora and fauna. Much of the work has been carried out by volunteers, including local schools.

From here we climbed the 64 steps that form one of the approaches to the Western Heights and during a well-earned "breather" there was a short explanatory talk on the management of the area. Our leader emphasised the importance of scrub clearing and grazing, (the latter carried out so effectively by the Dexter cattle). By this process the coarse grasses are kept down, thus encouraging the growth of finer grasses and flowers. Among the various orchids to be found here are the common spotted orchid, the bee orchid and the late spider orchid. Although there were no orchids in bloom, because it was too early in the season, there was sufficient leaf growth to show the difference between the various types.

Within a few weeks some areas here would be carpeted with hundreds of common spotted orchids, a feature of the Heights.

However, on our safari we were compensated for the lack of orchids by the carpets of cowslips covering the floors of the caponiers of the Drop Redoubt. As we progressed along our route, with an almost continuous commentary from our guide, we were encouraged to look, smell and even taste some of the wild herbs, like sage or marjoram. Wild Cabbage grows in abundance here, although it is rare elsewhere in Britain.

We wondered at all this beauty to be found amongst a military fortification only a stone's throw from the town centre.

Members may like to be reminded that there is to be a walk around the ditches and batteries of the Western Heights, led by Jon Iveson of Dover Museum, starting from the top of the Grand Shaft at 2.00 pm on Sunday 25th October.

